Parentlife to Citylife: how to manage the transition

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As a working mum, I know how challenging it can be to return to work after a period at home with your baby. As an employment lawyer, I also know the mistakes made by employees and employers as they try to adjust to this new reality. With uptake of shared parental leave slowly gaining pace, this is a subject that now applies to men and women. Here are my tips for a successful return:

- Start talking to your employer as early as possible (without eating into your leave too much: those last

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- In advance of any discussions with your boss, decide what working pattern you want. Think about the likely objections and be ready to address them. Think creatively: part-time, from home, term-time only, as part of a job share. If you have a partner, discuss with them who is better-placed to ask for flexible working. Be prepared to be flexible but know where your red lines are (i.e. what won't work for your family). If you are asked to submit a formal flexible working request, make it as thorough as possible, addressing the potential impact on your employer.
- Be aware of your legal rights: for example, your employer is obliged to deal with any flexible working request reasonably and give a decision within 3 months (if your request is refused you may have a sex discrimination claim); it is unlawful to treat you worse than other employees because you have been on leave (e.g. not giving you the best clients or giving you a lower appraisal rating than you deserve); if your colleagues received a pay rise while you were off, you are also entitled to one; your rights regarding your job vary depending upon how long you were off but, in short, your employer needs a very good explanation if it tries to say your old job isn't available; and your employer must provide suitable facilities for breastfeeding (the toilet does not count). Awareness of your rights is vital, but don't start quoting those rights too early: it's always better to try to resolve things informally in the first instance.
- Be prepared for the first month or so to feel very alien. You will likely feel a whirlwind of emotions including guilt (about leaving your child), anxiety (about your ability to do your job and/or how your child is coping), relief (about getting some sense of yourself

back), stress (about how little time you have) and tiredness (because you're a parent!). But take comfort from the fact that so many have successfully managed the transition before you: it does get easier.

- Go back with a positive attitude and do what you can from your side to make it work. Even with the best employer, it will be a challenging time so be wary of blaming your employer for everything. Instead, focus on reminding them what an asset you are.
- While you are at work, enjoy having hot coffee and meeting colleagues and contacts for lunch. On your break, nip to the local department store for some uninterrupted shopping time!
- Don't get into bad habits like weekend working or working on your day off, unless it's absolutely necessary. Once colleagues and clients know you are contactable, the amount of contact will increase and inevitably eat into your family time.
- Keep any new working arrangement under review. If it isn't working (e.g. you're working full time hours for a part time salary), say so.
- If you feel that things are not the same on your return, try and work out whether that's for personal reasons (i.e. you'd rather be at home with your child) or whether it's related to how you're being treated. Keep a record of any poor treatment: what was said, by whom and when. Talk to your manager or HR in the first instance. If there is no improvement, consider taking legal advice, contacting ACAS or raising a grievance.
- Don't do anything rash like resigning without fully considering the financial and reputational implications, and, more personally, whether you will be happy without a job or able to find another one which accommodates your need for flexibility. Constructive dismissal is a difficult claim for an employee to win and it usually better to try and negotiate an exit while you are still employed.

- Also bear in mind whether any contractual pay that you received during your leave will be reclaimed if you resign.

It's reasonable for your boss to expect you to get back to business fairly quickly but, if he wants to successfully integrate you back into the business, he also needs to appreciate that your needs and priorities are likely to have changed. Positive attitudes on both sides and keeping the lines of communication open are crucial to a successful return.

Ruth Gamble, Partner at BDBF

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